

On the Trail of Negro Folk Songs

Marybeth Hamilton

Birkbeck College, University of London

Often, in the years that followed, Dorothy Scarborough recalled the night when her search first promised fruition, when after months of letter-writing and interviews she heard the sound of the uncorrupted black voice. She heard it in 1921 from John Allan Wyeth, a 76-year-old white Civil War veteran and nationally renowned surgeon, one-time president of the American Medical Association, and founder of the Polyclinic Hospital, the first postgraduate school of medicine in the United States. Seven years earlier, Wyeth had published his memoirs, *With Sabre and Scalpel*, which included accounts of slave songs and dances he had learned growing up on his family's Alabama plantation. Scarborough was desperate to meet him, and a doctor friend offered to make introductions. Letters were sent, an appointment was made, and on a breezy spring evening the friend brought Scarborough to Wyeth's door.

Reserved, formal, and accustomed to deference, Wyeth was imposing, but Scarborough soon felt at ease: at age 43 years, she had a calm, sweet, daughterly manner, and an intimate knowledge of Southern patriarchs. Her father, John Bledsoe Scarborough, had been a Confederate veteran from Louisiana, like his wife a child of slaveowners, and in the war's aftermath he became a judge and a trustee of Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Dorothy Scarborough grew up in his shadow, expected to take on the role of her father's hostess, but she had ideas, and in her quiet way she rebelled. By 1899, she had earned a BA and an MA in English at Baylor, and when her father died in 1905 she put her degrees to work, teaching sporadically at Baylor while pursuing a doctorate in English literature, traveling first to the University of Chicago, then to Oxford University, only to discover that the university refused to grant women degrees. In 1915, she enrolled at Columbia University and began a PhD thesis on the supernatural in English fiction, and almost immediately, Columbia's extension division offered her a post teaching creative writing. She quit her job at Baylor, shipped up the last of her belongings, and settled in New York City for good.

Up until then, Scarborough's writing had focused on the lore and literature of distant lands, but abruptly, when she moved to New York, she began writing about the South. In 1919, she published *From a Southern Porch*, a celebration of languorous summer days spent on her sister's front porch in Richmond, Virginia. "I can see a black woman going by on the road, a basket of clothes balanced on her head—swaying but never in danger of falling," she wrote.

Groups of laughing gay young Negroes pass by to their work or to errands in town. Little boys, as black as the berries they have in their buckets for sale, are on their way to market. An old mule ambles restfully down the road, drawing a cart that creaks with rheumatism and years, and that has one hind wheel at an alarming angle with the body of the cart. But the driver, an ebony antique, is unagitated, and the animal at ease of mind. Not for any inducement would that mule quicken his pace. Autos from the city whirl by with sophisticated snorts and honk-honks, raising dust in whorls (7–8).

What Scarborough reveled in, from the front porch, was a South that felt and sounded unchanging, a black folk that could have stepped straight out of the mid-nineteenth century. "Not for any inducement would that mule quicken his pace"—nor, she might have added, would the "ebony antique" who drove him. On foot and in horse carts, calm and unhurried, they exuded a placid contentment that was altogether unshakable, that could not be disturbed even by the passing automobiles, with their "sophisticated snorts and honk-honks."

So Scarborough had believed in 1919. But the next year brought the release of Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues," the first blues recording by an African-American singer, which sold untold thousands of copies within weeks of issue, nearly all to black consumers, and created the so-called "race records" industry virtually overnight. Suddenly her portrait of a people doggedly resisting technology seemed much harder to sustain. As African Americans bought recordings *en masse*, by one estimate some six million disks in one year, suddenly those mellifluous voices that she heard from the front porch seemed in danger of falling silent (Levine 225). In January 1921, Scarborough sent out a letter on Columbia University stationery asking for help in collecting black songs. The spirituals, she argued, had been well-documented, but Negro folk song was a far broader

category. "I am trying to make as complete a collection of these as possible, since these interesting and valuable reflections of our southern life may soon be forgotten if they are not preserved in some permanent way," she noted. "It is the genuine negro songs that I wish, not those written by white people, but the ones made and sung by the colored race" (Papers n.d.).

To begin her interview, Scarborough asked Wyeth about his childhood, and he told her about his parents, who like so many of the best people in the South had been, at heart, emancipationists. They bought slaves for house service only because white domestic servants were not an option, and they treated them with a kindness that soon turned to love, nursing them through sickness and age. The slaves, men and women of fine character, responded with unflagging devotion. He had been particularly close to an elderly slave, Uncle Billy, who had taught him how to sing and dance and play the banjo. Like all the family's servants, Billy remained loyal during the war, and after the Confederate surrender, a Republican Negro cut his throat (*On the Trail* 23).

They were nearly all dead now, Wyeth mused, those old-time Negroes. Faithful, patient, submissive, contented, they had a charm of manner that today's colored citizens lacked. The trust and affection between the races: that had disappeared too. No white child growing up today could know what it felt like to sit at Mammy Tildy's hearth late at night listening to her "skeery" stories or to sit on the steps of Uncle Billy's cabin, where he had learned to play the banjo, the slave's large hands guiding his small ones as they pressed and plucked the strings.

Long ago, after Billy was murdered, he had put his old banjo away, but he brought it out for Scarborough's visit. He could still remember the songs. The scientist in him found them intriguing (the Negroes' idea of rhythm, he told her, showed their "low order of development"—when dancing, they patted the ground, while the more evolved Indians reached away from the earth), and sometimes, if he was lucky, he could capture the grain of Billy's voice (*On the Trail* 99). He sang "Jimmy Rose," a song that he believed Billy had made up, and "Run Nigger Run," a song Scarborough remembered her mother singing, about the comic misadventures of the darkies eluding the slave patrols. "He evoked melodies of wistful gaiety by drawing a handkerchief across the banjo strings," Scarborough noted, "and lively tunes by playing it with a whisk-broom." They were "magical tricks," she concluded (100). "This is astounding to anybody who has seen him in the operating room," her

doctor friend whispered. "The rest of us feel honored at handing him a sponge, and no one could have convinced us he would turn himself loose on a banjo like this" (Papers, letter to Thomas Nelson Page, May 5, 1921).

And then, in the dwindling light, Wyeth rose and tossed aside the cane he had used since breaking his hip a few months before. He wanted to show Scarborough some of the old breakdowns, the way the slaves themselves had danced them, so slowly, gingerly, he began moving his body as Uncle Billy had taught him to move. He clapped his hands, bent his knees, clicked his heels, and patted his thighs, and as Scarborough watched, the surroundings faded, the tasteful décor and the expensive furniture and the roar and screech of the traffic below. This was folk song gathering at its most thrilling. As she wrote years later, "I felt transported to an old plantation of days before the war" (*On the Trail* 100).

To an extent that Thomas Edison did not foresee, the mechanical reproduction of music transformed human experience by freeing sound from its roots in communities, from the constraints of time and place. There may have been only one Mamie Smith, but by 1920, there were one million of her records in circulation, making it possible to hear her simultaneously from New Orleans to Chicago, from Charleston to Seattle, and from London to Johannesburg. Recording and mass-producing music allowed it to transcend more than just regional moorings: to an extent never before possible, African-American songs could break through the color line. Once only encountered at house parties and barn dances, on street corners, and the black showbiz circuit, the blues could be heard pouring out of speakeasies, nightclubs, houses, apartments, drug stores and barbershops, hardware stores and funeral parlors, anywhere race records were played or sold. White people in cities could not avoid hearing it, and many were frankly appalled. "Hundreds of 'race' singers have flooded the market with what is generally regarded as the worst contribution to the cause of good music ever inflicted on the public," one aggrieved listener noted. "The lyrics of a great many of these 'blues' are worse than the lowest sort of doggerel and the melodies are lacking in originality, lilting rhythm and any semblance to musical worth" (Calt 11). For some, this was vulgarity pure and simple, and they gave it no more thought than that. But for others, no less dismayed, but more reflective, this was something more unsettling: the clarion call of a new black urban world.

From her apartment on the fringes of Harlem, Dorothy Scarborough heard that clarion call loud and clear. Her 1921 appeal for

“genuine Negro songs,” the appeal that took her to Dr Wyeth, resulted in her 1925 book *On the Trail of Negro Folk Songs*. Part song anthology, part history, part folklore compendium, part memoir, the book is virtually unread today, and Scarborough herself has slipped into the peculiar obscurity of southern apologists, those white men and women who lamented the passing of the gracious days of the plantation, and who were, on the face of it, utterly untroubled by what W. E. B. DuBois famously called “the problem of the color line” (221). Without doubt, the book makes for difficult reading. Scarborough’s prose, “delightful” according to her original reviewers, has a studied whimsy about it that feels, today, affected and cloying. More troubling still are the assumptions she makes: that the music passed down by black southerners reflects “the lighter, happier side of slavery” (128); that the songs’ syncopated rhythms and singular word-play speak of the irrational, illogical “colored mind” (272).

Yet, behind the book lies an obsession that demands scrutiny. Scarborough’s interview with Dr Wyeth launched a four-year search for “genuine Negro melodies” that took her across the South, as she met up with white informants who recreated the voices of the kindly aunts and uncles who had fed them, played with them, and sung them to sleep. In none of this was she unusual. At a time when ethnographers documenting Native American ritual collected from Native Americans directly, enthusiasts of black song like Newman White, Robert Gordon, Emmet Kennedy, Frank Dobie, and Frank Brown preferred to rely on their own recollections or those of elderly white Southerners whose reminiscences of a childhood soundscape were shot through with “the fairy tale of a beautiful Southern slave civilization,” as W. E. B. DuBois called it (qtd. in Hale 51).

What should we do with these recreations? It is too simplistic, obviously, to treat them as evidence of a “slave culture.” To give just one example: “Run Nigger Run,” which Wyeth sang to Scarborough, did date back to the mid-nineteenth century, but it is unlikely that slaves themselves originated or even willingly sang it, at least not in the form of the comic ditty that Wyeth and Scarborough remembered. The slave patrols that it described were notorious for their brutality. Asked about the song in the 1930s, one ex-slave remarked “Sometimes I wonder iffen de white folks didn’t make dat song up so us niggers would keep in line” (Genovese 618). Wyeth’s narrative of his idyllic childhood is permeated with a reactionary nostalgia that cannot help but tarnish whatever facts it might contain. The songs themselves seem almost incidental to the memories their performance evoked and (from Wyeth’s side anyway) to the

experience of projecting himself into an imagined blackness. While he did not don blackface, it is impossible not to see this as minstrelsy. That Wyeth inveighed against the Negro's "low order of development" while "turning himself loose on the banjo" is the classic blackface dynamic—revulsion mixed with fascination, disgust with desire.

Yet, to dismiss these enactments as mere racist fantasy is to miss much of what they have to reveal. What passed between Wyeth and Scarborough was more than an interview—it was a ritual of belonging. Recreating the voice of the plantation Negro had been a southern obsession since the late nineteenth century, carried out in dialect fiction, stage performances, and state and local folklore societies. Scarborough's list of her informants reads like a who's who of self-styled "darky dialecticians," from John Trotwood Moore to Louise Clarke Pynelle to Thomas Nelson Page, who built careers ventriloquising the plantation Negro in stage appearances and works of fiction that brought regional, sometimes national renown.

Fearing that authentic black music was being drowned out by mass-produced replicas, Scarborough set out in search of the real thing. That the real thing turned out to be a white imitation invites us to consider the place of nostalgia, imagination, and fantasy in the shaping of the African-American folk canon, and, indeed, the protean nature of "authenticity" itself. As Regina Bendix and Benjamin Filene have argued, claims of authenticity—which assert, in effect, that some expressive forms are more "real" than others—are, unavoidably, political, social critiques mounted by intellectuals making a bid for cultural power. To claim, as Scarborough did, the capacity to distinguish the real from the spurious is to set oneself up as a cultural arbiter, endowed with superior taste and discernment, a role that confers the authority to police the boundaries of popular art.

Scarborough's own practice of discernment, fed by dismay at the popularity of race records, echoed a long-standing lament among intellectuals across the industrial West at the loss of what Walter Benjamin would describe in 1936 as the "aura" of the work of art (221). By "aura," Benjamin meant its uniqueness as a hand-made object, or, as Miles Orvell puts it, the "quality of intensity [that makes it stand] out against the featureless background that constitutes the main hum of experience" (xvi). Central to that featureless background were the standardized products of commercial amusement. With the rise of the music industry, many believed, authentic folk songs were being drowned out by

assembly-line replicas. That no commercial recording could be an authentic folk song was accepted virtually without debate. Folk music was composed anonymously, transmitted orally, and suffused with the spirit of the peasantry, and because that unspoiled people was fast disappearing, genuine folk song was fading fast. Its gentle tones could not compete with the strident strains of commercial popular music. "There is an enemy at the doors of folk-music which is driving it out, namely the common popular songs of the day, and this enemy is one of the most repulsive and most insidious," noted the British composer Hubert Parry in 1899. "In true folk songs there is no sham, no got-up glitter, and no vulgarity. [T]hese treasures of humanity are getting rare, for they are written in characters the most evanescent you can imagine, upon the sensitive brain fibres of those who learn them, and have but little idea of their value" (qtd. in Middleton 131).

Yet, if Scarborough's quest for genuine African-American melodies in some ways simply extended a long-standing lament against mass-produced culture, it also had meanings that were specifically racial. Setting out "on the trail of Negro folk songs," she took part in a quest that stretched back at least to the Civil War, when the South was flooded with white northerners, most of them veterans of anti-slavery efforts, who were riveted by the music they found. As Ronald Radano has argued, landmark accounts such as Allen, Higginson, and McKim's 1867 *Slave Songs of the United States* celebrated a music of uncommon beauty and strangeness, shaped by the "remarkable musical capacity" of a "half-barbarous" race who retained a primal tie to the natural world (533). Yet, within that romance of racial difference, as abolitionists employed it, lay a critique of racial injustice that W. E. B. DuBois would bring to fruition in *The Souls of Black Folk*. However "veiled and half articulate" their language, the sorrow songs as DuBois heard them were ultimately political testimony. Their authenticity lay in their powerful evidence of the horrors of slavery and in their vision of "a truer world" where "men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins" (380, 382, 386).

Scarborough, like DuBois, was moved by her memories of transcendent black singing, but to those echoes she attached different meanings, a different history, and a different set of emotional and political truths. That she sought those resonances in re-enactments by white Southerners raises questions about the tangled history of song collecting in the age of mechanical reproduction, the masks employed by enthusiasts of black music swept up in the magic of their search for the real.

In the years it took her to complete her book, Dorothy Scarborough made several trips to the South, relatively brief ones in 1921 and 1922 and then a year's sabbatical beginning in the autumn of 1923. It is virtually impossible to track her movements, to pin down where she journeyed and when: she drew up no itinerary (or at least did not preserve one) nor did she keep a diary or field notes. The account that she published in *On the Trail* depicted less a purposeful trek than a set of meanderings: a lazy few days in South Carolina, a languorous week in Mississippi—in her remembrance, they blended into each other, one long amble through an enchanted landscape. Like her friend Emmet Kennedy, whose 1925 book *Mellows* was an ecstatic reminiscence of the black songs of his childhood, she was searching for a place that was not on the map, “a region of uncontaminated beauty and pastoral dreams” (144), the magical land she had sensed as she watched Dr Wyeth, the “old plantation of days before the war.”

The idea of the “old plantation” as a source of transcendent black singing had rarely, if ever, been voiced by antebellum planters themselves. While some encouraged their fieldhands to sing to speed up the work pace, most seem to have heard in slave song simply savage wails, barbaric, uncivilized noise (Cruz 19–66). White Southerners' rhapsodic accounts of black singing were an entirely retrospective affair, beginning only in the late nineteenth century. The end of Reconstruction saw the rise of a new Southern elite, an uneasy mix of planters and industrialists united by their determination to reverse the fragile gains African Americans had won since the war. By the end of the century, the introduction of the sharecropping system was supplemented by a campaign of disfranchisement, segregation, and lynching, a full-blown racial caste system backed up, where necessary, by violence. Yet, the new racial order was never as stable as most Southern whites would have liked. Despite all their efforts to keep African Americans tied to the soil, black men and women proved stubbornly mobile, leaving the farm, sometimes leaving the South, and in ways large and small, real and imagined, abandoning old habits of deference.

Against that backdrop, southern whites turned to visions of (in the phrase of the period) “the old-time Negro.” By the late nineteenth century, that figure had the impress of science upon it. In 1888, the newly founded American Folklore Society declared its intention to collect and study “the fast-vanishing remains of folklore in America,” by which it meant “relics of old English ballads,” myths and tales of Native Americans, and “lore of

Negroes in the Southern States” (Newell 3). From the outset, the work of collecting the latter was dominated by white Southerners, who set up state and local folklore societies at the turn of the century that defined how the study of Negro folk lore would be pursued for the next 30 years. Few of their members drew upon fieldwork. Instead, they excavated their memories, conjuring up the old-time Negro as a ghostly rebuke to the new, mourning the loss of a golden age of racial harmony, the happy days of the plantation when blacks and whites had lived in friendship and peace. Women played a key role in this process as cultural caretakers, conduits of plantation lore, transforming their domestic seclusion into privileged access to a remembered world of tender emotion. As late as 1930, the folklorist Robert Winslow Gordon, who prided himself on his scientific rigor, spoke of their value as informants. “Many a dear little Southern lady whose hair is now white [has told me] that she used as a girl to beg the Negro women to shout for her, and, if no men were present, had joined in with them—thus herself learning the art” (Kodish 186).

Scarborough’s hair may still have been brown, but she built a career as a Southern lady, even though by 1921 she had spent six years in the North. In that persona, she found that her memories were transformed into knowledge, and she herself was accorded respect. She had grown up, she once remarked, as “a queer combination of tomboy and bookworm” (“Scarborough, Dorothy” 1), a studious girl who loved to climb trees and constantly butted up against social constraints. Once, when she was eight or nine years old, she attended a religious revival, watching in awe as men and boys stumbled forward to confess their sins and profess their faith. Yet, when she rose and attempted to do the same, she heard the room erupt in laughter and found herself shunted back to her seat (*The Unfair Sex* 5–27). If to grow up female in the South was, by and large, to confront that kind of belittlement, here she could voice her ideas and emotions and no one would question her right to speak.

In Negro folk song, she believed she had found the subject she was born to explore. Her first forays into the topic came in 1915, when as head of the Texas Folklore Society she gave a talk on “plantation melodies” for her presidential address. Later, when she began writing fiction (her first novel, *In the Land of Cotton*, a tale of white farmers in Texas, was published in 1921), she threaded black folk lyrics through the story and discovered that “readers were more interested in them than in anything I could write” (*On the Trail* 11). From the beginning, she took issue with mainstream folk music studies. A voracious reader, she had ploughed

through the books that defined the scholarly orthodoxy, the works of Northerners like Francis Child and George Lyman Kittredge, and while much of their argument struck her as insightful, their style and methods left her cold. She accepted the basics: a genuine folk song was of rural, communal origins, it had no single, definitive form, it was common property in the hands of non-professional singers who altered it freely according to their mood. Yet, Child and Kittredge approached song collecting as an act of taxonomy, endlessly classifying and cataloging multiple variants. For Scarborough, its lure was far more emotional, far more intuitive, an invitation to travel through time. “How many memories of my childhood and youth are associated with loved black faces!” she rhapsodized.

How I enjoyed the songs the Negroes sang, even though I was ignorant of their value! . . . I see a procession of black and yellow and cream-colored faces that have passed through our kitchen and house and garden—some very impermanent and some remaining for years, but all singing. Now, when I sit on a porch at night, I am in fancy back at our old home, listening to the mellow, plaintive singing of a Negro congregation at a church a half-mile away—a congregation which “ne-er broke up” at least before I went to sleep, and which gathered every night in a summer-long revival. I can project myself into the past and hear the wailful songs at Negro funerals, the shouting songs at baptizings and the creek or river, old break-downs at parties, lullabies crooned as mammies rocked black and white babies to sleep, work-songs in cotton field or on the railroad or street-grading jobs. All sounds of human activity among the Negroes in the South used to be accompanied with song. It is so now to a certain extent, but less than before. (6, 9–10)

In the modern world, she was convinced, genuine black melodies were fast disappearing, as those “loved black faces” gave way to anonymous new ones who were no longer disposed to break into song, who had fully succumbed to “the Victrola, the radio, the lure of cheap printed music” (281–82). The more she read, the more convinced she became. African Americans’ too-enthusiastic embrace of modernity, in the form of education, factory labor, and migration to cities, was eradicating what one commentator described as the Negro’s “highest gift, his spontaneity. Songs start from nothing, from the loading of a truck, the possession of

a banjo, the half-remembered line of a hymn, and grow in an hour, never to be exactly repeated . . . The songs may live, but the best thing of all, the free impulse, the pattern of careless voices happily inventing as they go, if it dies it cannot be resurrected" (Littell 74). That "free impulse" still existed in the souls of some black southerners, but its days were clearly numbered. "The plantation Master and the plantation Negro stand today definitely at the parting of the ways," lamented her friend the South Carolina novelist DuBose Heyward. "The call of the city has already been heeded. The migration has commenced. They will be taken from our fields, fired with ambition, and fed to the machines of our glittering new civilization" (185–86).

In the face of that disheartening prospect, capturing authentic black songs became an imperative. Her sources she saw as impeccable: elderly white Southerners who had absorbed the melodies they had heard from black caretakers with the whole-hearted devotion only children could show. Although she had her own vivid memories of such figures, by and large, she let her informants speak for her. They told of stealing away to the servants' quarters, treasured illicit moments in childhoods otherwise ruled by decorum. "I sat in the kitchen and learned songs, stories and the buck and wing dances, when I was first able to carry a tune until I went away to school at thirteen," recalled Udly Jones Wheeler. "I didn't know what I was singing, I just sang as he sang" (Scarborough Papers n.d.). And they mourned the steady deterioration in the years that had followed. "Once the trusted servant and almost constant companion of the white man, the Negro, since he became free, has become shiftless, uncertain in his responsibility, and morally outcast," argued her informant J. E. Morrow. "The happy days of the plantation have passed; with them have gone 'Swanee Ribber,' 'My Ole Kentucky Home,' 'Uncle Ned,' 'Nellie Gray' and 'Old Black Joe' . . . No longer does the Negro sit about his little cabin and sing his rich old melodies to the plinky-plinky-plank-plank-plank of his banjo. No more the pathos of a heart longing to hunt for the possum an' de coon on de ole Kaintucky shore; no more the pining for the home far away; no longer the passion of a bereaved heart in a plaintive 'I shall nebber see my darlin' eny mo.' The art of banjo playing has almost been lost, and where it survives, the instrument has been prostituted to thumming out vulgar dances for dives or cheap ragtime songs for carnivals or medicine shows" (Morrow 1).

Scarborough would not have phrased it so bluntly, but at heart, she would have agreed. What she heard and saw in her informants' singing

and dancing was an evocative contrast to the jangle of Victrolas that drifted through her windows in Manhattan. She had no doubts about the accuracy of such performances, their value as historical artifacts. Black people themselves were no longer singing, at least not the kinds of songs she was after. Dr Wyeth, in contrast, could evoke Uncle Billy's dancing and singing with scientific precision, and not only because he had memories to draw on. As Scarborough repeatedly maintained, "the Negro is by nature a mimetic creature, dramatizing all he knows, his experiences and the life about him, expressing everything in form and motion" (*On the Trail* 65). Like most other white Southerners of her generation, she assumed that slave songs and dances had originated, not from an African inheritance, but from imitation of the slaveholding class. That inborn disposition to mimicry explained both the high class of melodies developed under slavery, when blacks were in constant contact with aristocratic whites, and the danger of urban migrations, because black men and women would inevitably take on the character of their surroundings. What Dr Wyeth was enacting was not just a dance but an intimacy, a tender care and reciprocity that once existed between the races. Seen in that light, his performance became not a mere copy, but an imitation of an original that was itself an imitation, a hall of mirrors whose multiple refractions devolved from a source that once had been white.

Hence, Scarborough's sense that obtaining genuine black song need not involve speaking to genuine black people, apart from those born into slavery or, in some indefinable but palpable way, touched with the spirit of the Old South. Occasionally in her travels she stumbled upon them, and then it was as if time had stopped. Their backs stooped and their faces lined, in beautiful, quavering voices they sang songs that no one else remembered, and when she pleaded for more they smiled indulgently, as though at the vagaries of a demanding child.

And sometimes, she got more than songs: memories of loved ones who had been lost to her. Once in Natchitoches, Louisiana, when she was wandering through the ruins of her family's plantation, an elderly black man approached her deferentially and introduced himself as Sebron Mallard, one of her late grandfather's slaves. Although he could not sing and could not help her directly, he was able to verify the antiquity of some of the songs she was investigating, and he had vivid memories of her father, a high-spirited boy who had run away to join the Confederates at age 17 years. "I was ploughing when I got the word that Mister Johnny's daughter was nigh here, and I drapped the plough and made tracks toward

you,” he explained. “Mister Johnny war de youngest of all de boys, but he knowed how to work harder and laugh more than any of ‘em.” He looked at her fondly. “He said, ‘Li’l mistis, is you well? Is you happy?’”

“Yes, Uncle Sebron, I’m always well, and I’m very happy,” I told him.

He looked at me with dimming eyes.

“My ole pappy tol’ me befo’ he died that good luck would be bound to go with ol’ Marster’s fambly because they was allus so good to their pore slaves. They brought us up mannerble, and I brought my chillun up thataway, too, and ain’t none of us never been arrested nor had no trouble. But some of the young folks these days isn’t that way and it makes trouble. Us old folks sees when dey do wrong, and it hurts us, but we can’t do nothing, cause we’s feeble and we’s few.”

“White folks and black folks look like they ain’t live lovely together like they used to” (*On the Trail* 17).

Voices like Mallard’s, speaking words she could have scripted, were for Scarborough the black voices that mattered; to others, she was largely indifferent. After leaving Natchitoches, she traveled to Texas and spent a few days with a friend, the state’s governor, Pat Neff, who urged her to follow up an encounter he had on a recent visit to Central State Prison Farm. “A Negro man came up to him after supper,” Scarborough related, “and said, ‘Will you listen while I sing you a song?’ He rendered a ditty whose refrain ran as follows:

‘If I had the gov’ner
Where the gov’ner has me,
Before daylight
I’d set the gov’ner free.
I begs you, gov’ner,
Upon my soul:
If you won’t gimme a pardon,
Won’t you gimme a parole?’ (31)

Ten years later, chasing his own dream of authentic black voices, John Lomax would record another pardon song by that same convict in

Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana, but the prospect of hearing him did not entice Scarborough. She enjoyed Neff's anecdote and wrote down the lyrics, but, for her, the governor's rendition was real enough.

To the end of her life, Dorothy Scarborough remained a reticent person. To read the collection of her papers at Baylor University, thick with manuscripts and letters from correspondents, is to be struck by her remoteness: carefully culled by her sister to remove anything unduly personal, the archive contains virtually no letters *from* her, barely a trace of her private voice. Neither can that private voice be made out in the pages she wrote for publication, where she dwells at most length on the memories of others and says relatively little about her own. What we are left with is the voice that Scarborough carefully cultivated: that of the archetypal Southern lady—"our demure, delicate, poised, other-minded Dot," as one of her friends described her (*The Wind* xiv). That voice is persuasive even though her researches for *On the Trail* led her to move with a freedom that few Southern white women could have imagined. "I have wandered through the colored quarters of many towns and cities, hailing many an old mammy and uncle to beg for songs," she wrote. "I have made friends with countless children, loitering to watch their play and hear their singing, stopping them from their errands, rousing them from their naps in public places. I have loitered in market places to watch the women buying their supplies, and overhear their conversation and their chance humming, and have strolled along levees and quays in many a town to hear the Negro men sing at their work" (Papers n.d.). That she seems no less refined and genteel for so doing simply heightens our sense of the magical landscape to which song collecting transports her: a world where racial boundaries do not impinge upon her, where danger never looms.

There is one time in the book, and only one, when her safety is threatened. While gathering songs near Natchez, Mississippi, Scarborough encounters a baptism being held in a pond on the grounds of a mansion that burned in the war. She had seen the ritual once or twice in her childhood, but framed by the ruins of an old plantation, this one unfolded with the power of a dream. The candidates for baptism filed to the edge of the water, ghostly figures enveloped in white, their voices raised in a weird, eerie dirge. As the preacher cried out in exhortation, each candidate plunged into the water and resurfaced thrashing and wailing in ecstasy, while the hundreds of black worshippers gathered at the waterside responded with shouts and groans. For a time, Scarborough watched the

services from the top of the mansion's old marble stairway, but the drama grew too intriguing, and as "with each immersion the excitement grew, the shouting became more wild and unrestrained, the struggles of the candidate grew more violent" (15), she moved into the crowd and pulled out her camera to capture the proceedings on film.

The shouter would fall on the ground, writhing about as if in anguish, tearing her hair, beating off those who sought to calm her. Sometimes one, reeling too near in the throes of thanksgiving, would fall into the water and have to be fished out, somewhat subdued but still shrieking, and led off to dry in the sun.

I tried repeatedly to get a picture of the scene, but each time I adjusted the Kodak, some shouter would start up beside me and all but push me into the pond. That little black box seemed to have an unfortunate effect on the crowd. One time I thought I would persist, but in the melee I was all but crushed. I was between the pond on one side and a barbed-wire fence on the other, with no chance for escape but a tree which I might have climbed had it not been a *bois-d'arc*, full of hard thorns. The crowd surged against me, and I had to put up my Kodak hastily and become as inconspicuous as possible. I do not think they meant to harm me, but it was merely a matter of emotional excitement. Even my pencil taking down songs upset them (16).

Reading Scarborough's account of the baptism, it is tempting to take it as a kind of fable, a distillation of the corrupting power she saw at work in the Machine Age. In the crowd, she discovers the unfortunate effect that a machine—"that little black box"—had upon the people whose rituals she was trying to capture. No wonder Scarborough so feared the impact of the phonograph: mechanical instruments like Victrolas and cameras created a dangerous kind of self-consciousness, and a primitive folk that had been simple and nurturing suddenly became a mob.

So powerfully does Scarborough evoke this moment that it comes as a shock to discover that throughout her research for *On the Trail* she collected songs with mechanical devices: a bulky disk recorder that she used near her home in Manhattan and a portable recording phonograph that she took into the field. Scarborough began hunting for the machines early on in her research, writing to Thomas Edison, Inc., requesting "a

cylinder phonograph which can be used for home recording” in April 1921. Just what she recorded and when is uncertain—the cylinders wore out after a few playings, and she apparently discarded them after a musician friend transcribed their contents—but in her sessions with her white informants, she appears to have used the machine routinely. It seems almost certain that she had it with her when she turned up at Dr Wyeth’s apartment, that he “turned himself loose” on the banjo while facing a mechanical recording horn.

From the moment Scarborough embarked on her quest, she had to grapple with a dilemma that had vexed song collectors for over three decades: how best to capture authentic voices in the age of mechanical reproduction. That the arduous work of transcribing songs could be immeasurably eased by the phonograph had been apparent to song collectors virtually from the moment of the machine’s invention. “What specimens are to the naturalist in describing genera and species, or what sections are to the histologist in the study of the cellular structure, the cylinders are to the study of language,” pronounced the ethnographer Jesse Walter Fewkes in 1890, after pioneering the use of a graphophone, or cylinder phonograph, to record the language patterns of Maine’s Passamaquoddy Indians (Brady 55). “The apparatus proves to be a means by which the actual sound itself of which a music consists may, even in many of its more delicate characteristics, be stored up by the traveler, in a form permanently accessible to observation,” noted the psychologist Benjamin Gilman on hearing Fewkes’ recordings. “[The recording] can be interrupted at any point, repeated indefinitely, and even within certain limits magnified, as it were, for more accurate appreciation of changes in pitch, by increasing the duration of notes” (Brady 81). The Hungarian composer Bela Bartok, who made field recordings of eastern European folk music around 1900, found that the cylinders made audible “notes between the notes” that “cultured” westerners ordinarily could not discern (Chanan 10). The graphophone, in other words, expanded and intensified sensory perception, just as the microscope had for the eye. By extracting the voice from its human context and reproducing it in mechanical form, the machine allowed the investigator to strip bare its workings, to probe and manipulate, to parse and dismember. What resulted were objective facts, free from the investigator’s projections and sentimental effusions—not to mention the errors that were inevitable in any attempt to transcribe sound by hand.

Yet, the very precision that commended the machine to Fewkes and Bartok made it anathema to others, particularly those who had

experienced precisely how useful its assistance could be. “I lack entire faith in the [making] of wax records,” noted the folklorist Natalie Curtis Burlin, shortly after recording black students at the Hampton Institute in 1919. Mechanical accuracy, as she saw it, got in the way of folkloric truth, which celebrated “the instinctive song of un-selfconscious people—a type of music which is by its very nature furthestmost removed from all idea of mechanism” (Burlin 3). Far more important was the folklorist’s intuitive grasp of the songs she was hearing, gained from living amongst the singers until their rhythms become part of her own being. Scarborough had those words with her as she embarked on her project, and her own practice endorsed them. As a granddaughter of slaveowners, she believed she had inherited a body of knowledge that enabled her to distinguish the fake from the genuine, and like Burlin, she saw folk song gathering as an intuitive and quintessentially feminine practice. In her account of her meeting with Dr Wyeth, she posed herself as dutiful Southern daughter, coaxing him back to a childhood soundscape of tenderness and emotion. To have shown the machine in her account would have shattered the illusion, revealing the modern researcher behind the plantation-bred lady, the writer and teacher who through her connections at Columbia had access to technological aid.

That technological aid was crucial to her project (Figure 1). Scarborough used her cylinder recorder to capture music and lyrics, then threaded bits of musical transcription through her account of her subjects’ reminiscences. When her subjects remembered the music but forgot the words, her transcriptions indicated that too. What she was after was not a songbook, a set of playable musical arrangements—rather, an impressionistic record of her own journey, in which memories slid into half-remembered musical fragments, shards of melodies that the reader could just about hum but not in any real sense recreate. To describe this as documentation does not really capture it—it was more of a summoning of musical ghosts. Using a cylinder recorder allowed Scarborough to immerse herself in the illusion. With her hands freed from the work of transcription, she could slip into reverie, reliving, through her informants’ mimicry, the transracial intimacy she imagined she had known as a child.

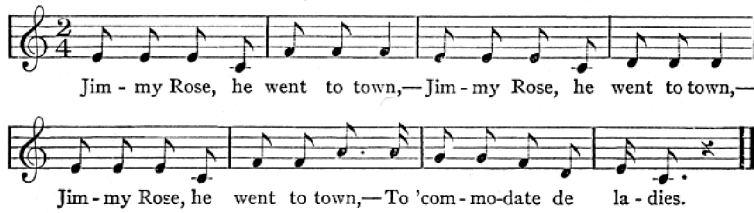
Compelling her informants to sit at a machine and sing their songs into a horn made for a different sort of collecting encounter, far more formal, controlled, and artificial, than she would ever admit to. Yet, in many ways, Scarborough’s hidden machine is of a piece with other tensions at work in her story. For what is most intriguing about *On the Trail* is its erratic but

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It has a little swing that is individual and yet characteristically "darky."

The Negro's music goes from one harmony to another, with no discord, and is like the harmony of nature. Dr. Wyeth gave an old dance-song, *Jimmy Rose*, which he said a Negro on his plantation had made up. "You can just hear in it a darky jog along in a jog-trot on a mule."

JIMMY ROSE



Jimmy Rose, he went to town,
 Jimmy Rose, he went to town,
 Jimmy Rose, he went to town,
 To 'commo-date de ladies.

Fare ye well, ye ladies all,
 Fare ye well, ye ladies all,
 Fare ye well, ye ladies all,
 God Ermighty bless you!

Dr. Wyeth performed magical tricks with a banjo, as he had been taught by old Uncle Billy in slavery times. He evoked melodies of wistful gaiety by drawing a handkerchief across the banjo strings and lively tunes by playing it with a whisk-broom. And when he danced some of the old breakdowns for me, just to show how they went, I felt transported to an old plantation of days before the war.

Another of the dance-songs he gave me was *Johnny Booker*.

I went down to de back of de fiel';
 A black snake cotch me by de heel.
 I cut my dus', I run my bes',
 I run right into a horney's nes'.

Chorus

Oh, do, Mr. Booker, do! Oh, do, Mr. Booker, do!
 Oh, do, Mr. Booker, Johnny Booker,
 Mr. Booker, Mr. Booker, Johnny Booker, do!

Figure 1: Negro folk songs

unmistakable note of detachment, its intermittent reluctance to commit to the plantation myths that the book otherwise seems to purvey. Take, for instance, her discussion of that central Southern archetype, the mammy. Although for much of the book Scarborough relies upon formula, a conventional elegy to

the “crooning sweetness” of her remembered singing, to the wonder of “a racial mother-heart which can take in not only its own babies but those of another, dominant, race as well,” at moments she abruptly steps back. “What other nation of mothers has ever patiently and with a beautiful sacrifice put alien children ahead of its own,” she asks, adding “in outward devotion if not in actual fact?” (159–60). That the “actual fact” might have been different, that the mammy might have been playing a role, that she might have felt hostility toward her “alien” charges, was a possibility that few white southerners ever broached.

“We wear the mask,” wrote the African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (71) in a verse of which Scarborough was likely aware. Once Scarborough had completed her travels, she began writing the book in her New York apartment, and the longer she worked on it, the more her persona as a plantation-bred lady took on elements of a masquerade. To look at the life she developed in the 1920s is to be struck by its contradictions. On the face of it a professional Southerner, she claimed to find the North cold, arid, and soulless, yet she never attempted to move away. Scarborough lived in New York till the end of her life, and her roots there became stronger as time went on. By the mid 1920s, she was spending her summers not in lazy reverie at her sister’s house in Virginia, but at her own cottage in Connecticut, where she cultivated a garden, wrote several novels, and enjoyed the relative quiet. Her New York apartment became a salon for minor literati, like her fellow book reviewers on the *New York Tribune*, friends like Fannie Hurst and Zona Gale, writing students like Carson McCullers, and displaced song gatherers like Emmet Kennedy. In time, those friendships became the most southern thing about her. Her 1925 novel, *The Wind*, can only be described as an anti-pastoral: based on a tale Scarborough originally heard from her mother, it follows a young bride who moves to West Texas only to be driven mad by the bleakness of the landscape—above all by the “wild shouting voice” of a howling wind that never lets her “know the peace of silence” (3). Although, for most of the decade, Scarborough continued to write regional fiction (tales of white Texas farmers interspersed with scraps of black folk song, which “seemed to me necessary to make the life of the section adequately real” [*Song Catcher* x]), the setting became increasingly unspecific, and her final novel, 1932’s *The Stretch-berry Smile*, takes place by and large in New York.

Far more than the Southern arcadia she sometimes evoked in her writing, New York City had been Scarborough’s salvation. In Texas, and

even in Oxford, her femininity constantly constrained her; in New York, she could support herself as a writer, teacher, and journalist, and she seems to have prized the crisp professionalism of that identity. She never married; she lived alone. And much as at times she aimed to hide it, she relished the mobility and anonymity the city allowed, the possibilities for loitering, wandering, eavesdropping, the same pleasures, indeed, of collecting black song. "She told him how on Saturday afternoons she would explore the town as if it were a jungle no one had seen before, would loaf for hours watching the life slip by on the East River, would visit the piers to see the ocean liners, would mingle with the foreigners in the tenement section," she wrote in her final novel. "On subways at rush hours, on elevated trains past the exposed domesticity of second-story windows, on busses up Fifth Avenue, up Riverside where gray battleships lay in the river, on ferry boats to Governor's Island with its army headquarters, to Staten Island and back to watch the miracle of the New York skyline at sunset, or as dusk brought out its million lights" (312–13).

It is impossible to know for sure where she wandered, what parts of the "jungle" she ventured into, but they almost certainly included Harlem. She lived on the fringes of what she described as the "greatest Negro city in the world," and in time she got to know people there ("The New Negro and the Old" 8). At Columbia, she taught and befriended the West Indian journalist Eric Walrond, whose collection of short stories *Tropic of Death* she helped nurse into print, and through him she met Charles S. Johnson, Walrond's editor at *Opportunity* magazine, the journal of black arts and politics produced by the Urban League. Although he may not have known of her interest in black folklore, Johnson admired her fiction, its attention to regional particularity, a skill he believed black writers should cultivate. In September 1924, he invited Scarborough to serve as a judge for *Opportunity*'s upcoming literary contest, which would award five hundred dollars in prize money to the most promising African-American writers. Over the next nine months, as she wrote the final drafts of *On the Trail*, Scarborough read hundreds of pages of African-American fiction, debating their merits with her fellow judges on the short story panel, including the black critic Alain Locke. On the first of May 1925, she joined Locke, Paul Robeson, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Carl Van Doren, Carl Van Vechten, and three hundred other writers, artists, and critics for a banquet ceremony at The Fifth Avenue Restaurant, awarding prizes to Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen for poetry, Sterling Brown and E. Franklin Frazier for essays, and Eric

Walrond and Zora Neale Hurston for short stories. "White critics, whom 'everybody' knows, Negro writers, whom 'nobody' knows, meeting on common ground," marveled the *New York Herald Tribune*. "The movement behind it means something to the race problem in general; certainly, it means something to American literature. We are on the edge, if not already in the midst, of what might not improperly be called a Negro renaissance" ("A Negro Renaissance").

Scarborough stumbled upon that renaissance in the final stages of drafting *On the Trail*, and she could not have failed to miss its challenge to white southerners enthralled with black singing, who claimed the authority to delineate authentic black voices, those that evoked "our southern life." "The day of 'aunties,' 'uncles' and 'mammy' is gone," retorted Alain Locke bluntly on the eve of the *Opportunity* dinner ("Enter The New Negro" 631). Those words would recur in his much-heralded anthology *The New Negro*, published in December of that year. The old-time Negro, he continued, had always been "more of a myth than a man," "a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism" (631). Putting an end to that historical fiction demanded a reinterpretation of black folk song and tale, and of paramount importance in that process was "the energy and awakening of the Negro scholar and folklorist," wrote Scarborough's student Eric Walrond. "For it is more or less common property in these United States today that if you really want to get to the heart and spirit of the black people you must do it through the medium of one of their own" ("Negro Folk-Song").

What Scarborough was hearing, all around her, was the sound of her own obsolescence, assertions that reminiscences of black song penned by southern whites were, at best, inconsequential, revealing little more than sentimental platitudes about African-American music's "heart and spirit." ("I am now struggling with Kennedy's *Mellows*," wrote Locke to Scarborough, "so charming in some respects, but so annoying in others" [January 19, 1926, Papers].) Just what she made of these claims is unclear, because Scarborough never addressed them directly, but the tone of her comments suggests unease. "I am considered something of an authority on Negro life and literature, and the Negroes of New York think of me as a friend who is willing to help in constructive ways," she wrote to a journalist in the final months of completing the book. "I am often asked by editors to review books on the subject and I frequently act as judge in contests . . . I am glad to do anything I can to help the Negroes develop

their talents and find their audience, and I am gratified at the progress I see them making in education and citizenship and art" (8 August 1925, letter to C. A. Hibbard, Papers). If Scarborough's talk of her "gratification" sounds an unmistakable note of condescension, it was surely fed by trepidation: fear that her authority as a writer was being undermined, that her subject matter was being stolen away.

In the end, that fear proved impossible to ignore. Before she could finish her book, she had to embark on one last journey, which for one brief, startling moment would open her tale to the modern world.

"For the last several years," Scarborough observes in her final chapter, "the most popular type of Negro song has been that peculiar, barbaric sort of melody called 'blues'" (264). It was, to her ears, at once disagreeable and compelling in its sheer oddity. Blues compositions had a jerky rhythm, "like a cripple dancing because of some irresistible impulse," and the abrupt stanzas, three lines instead of the customary four, gave them the shock of the unexpected, "like the whip-crack surprise at the end of an O. Henry story." Broadly available on recordings and sheet music, blues seemed on the face of it "to have little relation to authentic folk-music of the Negroes." But the music's singularity made Scarborough curious, and she set out "to trace it back to its origin," through referrals and tips making her way to West 46th Street and the music-publishing office of W. C. Handy.

Scarborough had never heard of Handy before one of her correspondents, the Mississippi planter William Percy, passed on his name. Born to former slaves in Alabama in 1873, Handy had worked as a bandleader in the Midwest and the Mississippi Delta before settling in Memphis and, in 1912, publishing "Memphis Blues," among the first pieces of sheet music with the word blues in the title. Its success led to others: "Beale Street Blues," "Joe Turner Blues," and "St. Louis Blues," which in the hands of the race record industry became perhaps the best-known blues of all time. By the time Scarborough tracked him down, Handy had moved his thriving business from Memphis to Times Square and established himself as among the city's best-known songwriters, although his international renown as self-proclaimed "father of the blues" was still over a decade away.

Scarborough peppered the composer with questions. Did the blues meet the criteria to be considered a folk music, based in rural traditions, remote from the world of cities, commerce, and machines? Had the form emerged anonymously? Did blues compositions spring up spontaneously?

Were the songs, to any extent, sung communally—"taken up by many singers, who change and adapt and add to [them] in accordance with their own mood" (265)? Yes, Handy replied, all that was true enough, but it did not get to the heart of the matter. What gave the blues its real standing as folk music was that it was "essentially of our race" (270), rooted in a collective black past. "Each one of my blues is based on some old Negro song of the south, some folk-song that I heard from my mammy when I was a child," he explained. "Something that sticks in my mind, that I hum to myself when I'm not thinking about it. Some old song that is a part of the memories of my childhood and of my race" (265).

Scarborough presented Handy's words without comment, unable, it seems, to digest them, and her silence leaves questions hanging in the reader's mind and, perhaps, in her own. Had Handy really had a mammy, that archetypal badge of genteel Southern whiteness? Did he compose his songs out of a kind of nostalgia, of, necessarily, a different character from that infusing the plantation myth? Above all, by Handy's criteria, what did the term "folk music" mean? Although Scarborough treasured authentic black song as the voice of an idyllic community, evoking the transracial intimacy she imagined she had known as a child, Handy, in words echoed by New Negro critics, asserted that the music's folkness lay in the fact that it was "essentially of our race," born of a history from which she was excluded, a black experience that she could not share.

Perhaps in Scarborough's encounter with Handy, and in those unasked questions, lay the seeds of what would become a retreat. Although she planned for *On the Trail* to be the first of a series of books about black folk song, she never returned to the topic. As her novels of the late 1920s moved ever further from a Southern setting, those black voices that once seemed so necessary "to make the life of the section adequately real" gradually lapsed into silence. The mounds of material on African-American music she claimed to have accumulated appear nowhere in her private papers. When she died abruptly of influenza late in 1935, she was at work on a book about song collecting tentatively titled *A Song Catcher in Southern Mountains*, but the manuscript described her experience in the Appalachians, in remote communities where she was a stranger, gathering traditional melodies from mountain whites.

In all kinds of ways, this account of song hunting differed from anything she had written before. Rather than relying on second-hand reminiscence, she describes collecting from the music's primary carriers, a remote, aloof people with whom she makes no claims of a shared past.

She depicts their “incredibly arid and difficult” lives with the dispassionate concern of a social worker (6), pointedly acknowledging their jarring discrepancy with the South of plantation myth. “[O]ne sees log cabins or shacks, fields black and poor, people whose faces show the lines wrought by struggle, care, and despondency,” she observes. “No beauty of Greek columns here—no dreaming lawns, no happy ease—but instead a terrible, proud poverty that cheats body, mind, and soul” (6). Collecting songs in this region means doing battle with isolation, reserve, and suspicion. That she succeeds at all owes in part to the intervention of teachers and missionaries, but more importantly to her appeal to wonder: in a region still “remote from the centres of commerce, inaccessible for lack of good roads” (3), she offers her subjects the chance to hear their voices played back on a recording machine.

Ten years on from *On the Trail*, Scarborough again hunted for songs with mechanical assistance, but this time her narrative makes no attempt to hide the machine. Her introduction devotes three pages to her efforts to find the appropriate mechanism, in the process lifting the veil on her use of a phonograph a decade before. “On my trips to collect material for *On The Trail of Negro Folk Songs* I had used an old-fashioned recording phonograph of a type not now manufactured, but that had been broken and so was not available,” she explains in her introduction (xi). Although she still owned a Speak-O-Phone disk recorder, it was too bulky to take into the field; in the end, she consulted technicians at the Dictaphone Corporation, who built a cylinder machine to her specifications. “The Dictaphone records, being of wax, are not permanent, and can be run off only a dozen to twenty, and they are less agreeable to listen to than the Speak-o-phone records, which are practically as good reproductions of sound as the radio or the phonograph,” she observes. “But the Dictaphone served my main purpose, which was to capture the tunes so that they could later be transcribed” (xi–xii). In the pages that follow, her Dictaphone becomes a central player in the drama, a bulky contraption arduously transported from the world beyond the mountains, a tool that her subjects regard with astonishment, an emblem of modernity.

It is hard to know what to make of this decision to push the Dictaphone to the front of the story. When she drafted the manuscript in 1932, no one was describing recording machines in this fashion—not ethnographers, whose scientific ethos demanded that they spotlight their findings and excise the tools by which they obtained them, and not even, at that stage, John Lomax, whose accounts of his field-recording

experiments would not see print for well over a year. But, perhaps, it amounts to a hesitant new start, an attempt to find a new voice. In *On the Trail*, Scarborough had written as a fond Southern daughter, her expertise in black song based on the fact that “I was a Southerner born and bred, and that I had been loving the Southern Negroes ever since I could remember anything” (30). Yet, in the wake of the New Negro movement, she could no longer voice the old plantation platitudes, nor could she assume that her readers would accept her judgments simply because she was born in the South. In chronicling song in the Appalachians, she sought a visible, palpable badge of authority. Her recording machine transformed her into what we might term a documentarian, a fact gatherer driven by disinterested compassion. The Appalachians, she discovered, housed a genuine folk culture, a people immune to mechanically reproduced music. “There isn’t a radio in the district,” one of her informants noted. “We have to make our own music and provide our own amusement” (Papers n.d.). Hence, the care she takes to assure her readers that she employs the machine purely as a tool of transcription. To do otherwise, to produce recordings that were “agreeable to listen to,” would run the risk of corrupting the culture whose music she sought to preserve.

Scarborough’s death cut short this tentative transformation, and we cannot be sure where it would have taken her. Perhaps, it would have provided a new beginning, a new voice of authority, that would have allowed her to return to collecting black songs. Yet, that seems unlikely. Even at the peak of her involvement, the songs had always mattered less to her than the affectionate exchanges she had in collecting them. Mostly, and of necessity, she had those exchanges with white informants, but every so often she had stumbled upon elderly black men and women born in the era of slavery, and then all the pleasures of the past rushed in upon her. Once, at a garden party near the Alabama–Mississippi border, she heard a haunting melody “floating on the breezes”; parting a curtain of ivy, she found an aged black laundress “engaged in the mysteries of the washboard” (Papers n.d.), singing a song that Scarborough remembered from childhood, when she drifted to sleep in her mammy’s arms. That was the way of Negro folk songs: their notes cracked open worlds otherwise inaccessible, “songs I knew but did not know that I knew” (Papers n.d.), memories she did not recall that she had.

Just how irrevocably that world was now lost to her had become clear in Handy’s office. Although she presented him in *On the Trail* as benign and affable, yet another in her gallery of kindly old aunts and

uncles, the reality of her encounter was far more unsettling than she ever let on. Soon after her visit, she wrote a draft account and sent it to her friend Ola Lee Gulledge, a musician and fellow Southerner who had transcribed her disk recordings and had accompanied her to Handy's office. Gulledge sent the manuscript back with puzzled comments scrawled across the margins. Why, she wondered, had Scarborough left out so much of what their visit had really been like?

Why not say that it was typical of all publication offices—filled with vaudeville stars (both genders—black and white) and cigarette smoke. Do you think it out of place to stress how business-like it was—when the man said, “Mr Handy is in his office, is very busy, and will not be able to see you”—and so forth (Papers n.d.).

Although Scarborough could present, if not assimilate, Handy's New Negro vision of folk song, what she could not abide, could not even acknowledge, was the brusque indifference she met with in his office. No greater contrast could be imagined with the world to which song hunting had once transported her. Here, the tenderness of her remembered South had been crowded out by a hard-nosed commercialism, faceless and altogether lacking in deference, as Scarborough found herself rebuffed in a smoke-filled office where white women and men jostled with black ones for the attention of a black entrepreneur. In the end, Handy's office is the silence at the heart of her tale, the unspeakable emblem of an unwelcome new world in which African Americans looked less like a “folk” than ever before.

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